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Looking at my Reflection: Mental Fitness of a Psychologist

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Being the Psychologist on a Carrier is inspiring and intimidating.

Though I was excited to have my first operational assignment, I was however apprehensive about the significance of my responsibilities. Soon after being on board the USS George Washington, I was relieved to realize that though I am the only Psychologist, I am not the sole provider – I am a part of a well-organized support network.

For the Suicide Prevention and Awareness Month on September, I collaborated with all the other support groups on the ship (i.e., Morale, Welfare and Recreation, Coalition for Sailors against Destructive Decisions, Deployment Resiliency Coordinator, Substance Abuse Rehabilitation Program, Chaplains and Health promotions) to coordinate “Mental

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Fitness Week.” Our goal was to focus on mental health rather than mental illness. We planned one event for everyday of that week which included mental health fair, suicide awareness message on the ship’s TV, writing-letter-of-gratitude booth, open mic night focused on the theme of “hope” and an “ice cream social” combined with a peer-to-peer speech on overcoming adversity.

Throughout the week, I came across many resilient young Sailors who shared their stories of overcoming grief and hardship on their own. So many of them started from an economically disadvantaged background, faced loss and adversity and found a way to march forward. I felt emotionally connected to them and their stories of mental strength and deliberation. I began to wonder what “mental fitness” really means to me.



Writing-letter-of-gratitude booth.

I have been questioning my own “mental fitness” since being underway on the George Washington. Like many Sailors onboard the ship, I, too, am processing grief. My dad passed away about 3 months ago, right before I came onboard the ship. Prior to being on the ship, I thought I was progressing through the bereavement stages as expected. I remember being in the “depression/reflection” phase and having crying spells initially but I soon transitioned into the “acceptance” phase. My dad had a productive and meaningful life and I had a close

relationship with him. I remembered how it felt when he bought me a red bicycle when I was nine. I remembered memorizing the names of countries and capitals in Elementary school just to impress him. I remembered how he tricked my sister into giving me the toy she and I were fighting over. I remembered how pleased he was when I took him on a boat cruise in Pensacola. I celebrated his life and our relationship. I was focused on the good memories and the thought of him and our relationship gave me a sense of accomplishment.

However, lately, I seem to have regressed back to “shock.” I now have a feeling of disbelief whenever I think of his death. I keep reminding myself that it really happened but I do not feel anything. I want to bring it up as a matter of conversation whenever someone asks me about my family but I cannot. Is this my mind’s way of protecting me from being overwhelmed because being on the ship is not conducive to processing grief? Is this a sign of mental strength or weakness?

Perhaps I have not fully acknowledged

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the extent of the void my dad left behind. May be I am not ready to move on just yet. May be there is no need to want to move on any faster. I find solace in the words of Viktor Frankl, the proponent of logotherapy, who said, “Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual” (p. 77). Perhaps “mental fitness” is the ability to commit to the task at hand. My main commitment right now is to help my Sailors accomplish the tasks that are meant for them. Ironically, though I was concerned about getting jaded quickly on the boat, my grief somehow enables me to be more compassionate and empathetic. Perhaps my own healing will follow in its own pace by being able to make deeper connections with others. I do not know where I stand in the bereavement process but I know I am where I am meant to be.



Health Fair (Beer-goggle Demonstration)

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For questions or comments, contact me at Nausheen.Momen@cvn73.navy.mil

References

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<http://www.drdariento.com> Dr. Justin D’Arienzo
Great article Dr. Nomen. Your article reminded me of two very fond years I served aboard the USS KITTY HAWK as the Ship’s Psychologist.

Best,

Justin D’Arienzo, Psy.D., ABPP,...now a civilian psychologist in Jacksonville, Florida.

Navy_Patriot
Nicely done